

Charles Gleason peddled on High Street, West Duxbury during the 20's and 30's. Known to the children as the "stock and underwear man" as he sold stockings and underwear.

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BROCKTON DAILY ENTERPRISE—WEDNESDAY, JULY 18, 1973

# Former Yankee peddler preserves fading folklore

By DOROTHY KAVKA

History books will record national events of catastrophic importance, but the passing scene "will live in the hearts of the common people" only if the local historians preserve its essence. Such is the contribution of Hanoverian, Charles L. Gleason of 96 Broadway who built his home at the "Four Corners" in 1909 — the year he was married — and has collected lore of the surrounding towns ever since, most of it during his career as a Yankee peddler.

Mr. Gleason, who was born in Barnet, Vt. in 1880, came to Massachusetts from his family's maple sugar farm as a young man and entered the dry goods business in Boston shortly after the turn of the century. It was there he learned of the peddler route through the towns of the South Shore and bought out the previous owner in 1904 — including the dry goods line, household wares, the wagon, and a runnereed pung for winter use, plus a horse to pull it. (He had 12 horses in the 35 years he operated his business.) This was when haircuts were 35 cents, postage 2 cents and Boston papers 2 cents.

LONG GONE down the dusty roads of the country towns of Pembroke, Marshfield, Duxbury, Hanover and Norwell which he serviced with his peddler cart are the housewives, the rural one-room factories, the hayloads drawn by ox teams, the "poor farms" and cow barns, and the boys with knee breeches he once knew. But his memories are sweet, his mind as keen as

Some 30 books of pictures and printed human interest notes were filled by him over the years, most of them of his environs, although in later years he made the same note-taking record of each of the eight trips South, to the New York World's Fair in '39, to the Gaspe Peninsula in 1940, that he and his wife (and sometimes with their relatives) took. In addition, of course, there were numerous short jaunts to Barnet, Vt. where he noted with satisfaction his old home had been preserved and improved over the years. He started his 16th book in 1944 and plans that eventually they will be housed in the Curtis Library's Historical Society rooms.

THE EARLY BOOKS tell of Yankee homes, the families who founded and who inherited them, who married whom, what business the men of the households followed, customs which have changed in various communities, churches that have burned, industries that have died out and the background of such places as Blackman's Point at Brant Rock — which, according to one note in his book "could have been bought for \$300 for the whole area at one time."

He tells about the Sylvesters, the Fords, Barstows, Bates, Watermans, Bowkers, Stetsons, Josselyns, Sprouls, White, Truitts, Shepherds and many other old New England family lines, with pictures of their homesteads and farms. He speaks of "Dog Corner," Dr. Charles Hammond, Damon the Caterer, Flarett's store, of Brick Kiln

Among his pictures are some of the Sylvanus Whiting house built in 1828 (at one time there was scarcely a house on the street which did not belong to a Whiting; of the burning of the Old Skunk Meeting House in Marshfield; of many of the fine old homes along the upper reaches of the North River. As he writes, recalling so clearly, in his most recent letter to members of the Historical Society:

"I can recall back in the Twenties when at a town meeting Harold Studley and I were appointed as a committee to write up a history where Jedediah Dwelley left off . . . Tommy Hayes and Jerry Hayes were the police force constables, John Flavell drove his grocery wagon for orders, "Chippy" Curtis sold bicycles as well as pills; both Tripp and Josselyn sold rum. Rube Donnell was our milkman at 10 cents a quart; Alice McNamara was a former teacher at the Almond School who had my sons in her class. She boarded at Rosa Sherman's. Later she married a Higgins. It was then interesting to watch Newt Gardner plowing the Sylvester fields with oxen. The only place to have them shod was at Jim Jones' blacksmith shop where they would be lifted up off the floor with a windlass to put on their eight shoes apiece. It was a pretty sight to see Sam's 20 or more cows grazing in the meadow. Horse and buggy driving was still seen occasionally. Ed Beal drove his cows past my house to the pasture and the whole pasture was clear except for huckleberry bushes. I used to see Mose Young rushing out of the Phillips Bates office with a red flag in hand to warn traffic

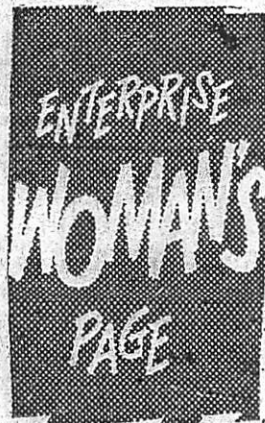
those ancient days stored up in some 30 scrapbooks filled with camera shots and neat, well-written notes about people and places along his route.

### Materials and Messages

Just one of the thousands of peddlers who covered the rural towns before the onslaught of the motor car and the paved roads made it possible for anyone who wished to go to the market to shop, Mr. Gleason brought the goods of the city to the homes of people on his route. Such items as dress materials and sewing threads, wearing apparel, "fancy" goods, kitchen supplies including pots and pans, skimmers, sieves, strainers, knives, ladles — even one time 400 enamelled milk pans for skimming the cream off the milk — were carried in his roomy wagon. Women would watch for his coming, run out to see what he had on board and would ask and give the news and gossip of neighbors they were eager to hear and to tell.

"People were friendlier and more trusting then," and there were no secrets, no private lives, despite the distance between homes. Everybody got to know everything about his neighbors and often sent messages to relatives by him.

Sometimes he'd meet a man driving a yoke of oxen, and little boys in short pants would beg to ride the route with him. The horse would stop at each town's drinking trough for a refreshing slurp of water and since it knew the road so well would trot along without direction, allowing Mr. Gleason plenty of time for reading as he rode along. Always he took his Brownie box camera along and photographed the old houses, neighbors and friends in the towns he covered — for posterity or perhaps just because he wanted them for his own reference.



time his wagon tipped over, strewn all its goods over the landscape and requiring the help of several men and boys to right it again.

### Old Customs

One section tells of old-time funeral customs dating from the early 1800's when a plain, inexpensive coffin was provided by a carpenter for a departed citizen, who was thereupon "laid out" by the carpenter's wife and with no fanfare there was a simple service and burial in the nearby cemetery. The whole thing would cost less than \$100. The Shepherd embalming service and the gradual development of funerals we know today had its local beginnings in this very same area of Pembroke.

Among the notes there is a description and picture of the building where Alonzo Perry made shoes in the 1870's, failed and went into the real estate business in Rockland at which he was very successful. The building — on Curtis St. in Hanover — was beside the road near the birthplace of George W. Curtis' son, John, who gave Hanover its public library, so-named for him. At one time there were eight school districts in the town of Hanover, pictures of many of them being in his notebooks.

THERE ARE sections on soap making, horseshoeing, ship building, the North River, the Old Quaker Meeting House (which was moved via river from Scituate in 1706, landing at Brick Kiln Lane Shipyard and drawn by oxen to its present location at the corner of Rte. 139), and wood-cutting.

Other notes tell of Mr. Gleason's visits to the old Ford store, established by James T. Ford and Co., later the "Nehaniel Ford and Sons," 1853, at "Millbrook," Duxbury which burned in 1921. The goods which were sold at this general store were brought by boat from Boston. One of the familiar signs he noted in the store was this whimsical comment on prices and the Yankee sense of humor so much a part of the character of those days: "Eggs — 20 cents; Fresh Eggs — 24 cents; Strictly Fresh Eggs — 26 cents."

Another section tells of the old-time customs relating to tramps and indigent persons. If a man wandered into town with no visible means of support it was customary to cart him to the edge of town and dump him off. It wasn't until after 1836 that the poor were no longer taken to the center meeting-house and parcelled out for board to the lowest bidder. (A man could be fed and housed for as low as \$5 per year in our money at that time.) In 1836 the poorhouse was established in the Ben Bailey farmhouse, with a tramp house . . . and later a jail set behind in 1876.

of coal cars and engine crossing Broadway on their way to the coal sheds down back . . ."

Mr. Gleason, who still lives in the comfortable house to which he took his bride, the late Olive Prouty Gleason, a teacher in the Market Street School in Rockland when he married her, still burns wood in his kitchen range, and cuts a few cords every day to keep in trim. He has a great deal of wood at \$1 a cord and believes it gives better heat than any other kind of fuel. At one time he hauled enough to burn all winter during the years he and his wife brought up three sons, all successful, all a credit to him . . . one with the federal Department of Agriculture, one with the Ford Motor Company, and another with Time-Life, Inc. He notes that it was a Hanover Prouty who invented the first plow in the United States.

### Still Active

Active in the Congregational Church of Center Hanover, Mrs. Gleason was a Sunday School teacher for over 20 years and he a deacon. Following his peddler years he has done a number of things useful to his community: worked for the Huntley Tree Service; as janitor-custodian at the Salmond School; and as estate caretaker for many of his neighbors. Earlier he served several terms as Hanover Selectman, Overseer of the Poor and Assessor (for a salary of \$300); and during the Thirties wrote a series of "Down on the Farm" articles for the "Rockland Standard," as well as a column for "The Plowman," his church periodical. He writes very well.

AT THE AGE of 93 it stands to reason Charlie Gleason has seen a lot of water go under the old North River stone bridge, a lot of historic landmarks come and go, all of his old associates as a peddler doze off in the lap of time. He dozes some too these days — when it is raining and he can't work on somebody's lawn or shrubs, going on his bicycle in preference to owning a car.

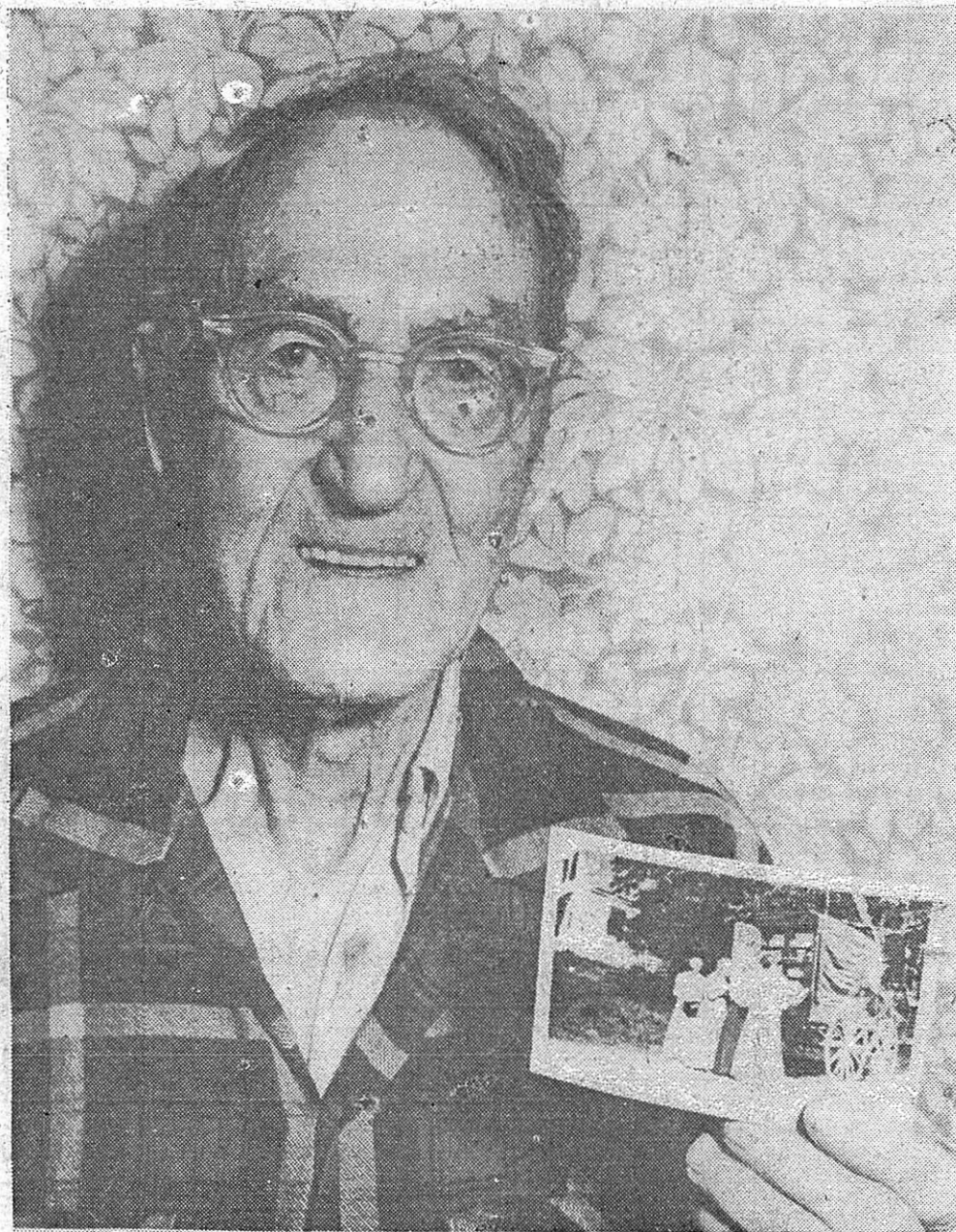
He misses the more relaxed days of his enjoyable peddler career when people had time to sit and chat awhile as they handled his "dry goods." The flavor of those times, the humorous little things which happened to bring a smile to both merchant and buyer and the human relatedness were what made his transactions so satisfactory. Thoughtfulness of others was a big part of it too, as for instance the woman who lived up a lane off the main road and who would hang a towel out of an upper window only when she wanted the peddler to bring in his supplies for her to inspect.

Living wasn't so bad, in those days, without the luxuries people seem to expect today. He recalls that he grossed \$1,000 one year with a single wagon and horse . . . "before the automobile spoiled it all for the horse peddlers."



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Charles L. Gleason of Hanover holds a nostalgic photograph of his wagon loaded with household items which he sold to residents along his South Shore route.